

R E V I E W S

THE VOICE(S) OF JAMES DICKEY

James Dickey. *The One Voice of James Dickey: His Letters and Life, 1942-1969*. Ed. Gordon Van Ness. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2003. Pp. 499. \$54.95 hardcover.

James Dickey. *The One Voice of James Dickey: His Letters and Life, 1970-1997*. Ed. Gordon Van Ness. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2005. Pp. 554. \$ 59.95 hardcover.

James Dickey. *Classes on Modern Poets and The Art of Poetry*. Ed. Donald J. Greiner. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2004. Pp. 310. \$39.95 hardcover.

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Although ours is a time when writing letters has given way to sending e-mails and calling on cell phones, ironically this is also a rich time for reading published letters of past literary figures. Could it be that we miss the willingness of the leisurely paced letter to hold a one-sided conversation, written in suspension with no expectation of a response five minutes later? And, because letter writing is a lost art, isn't it only natural to revere correspondence that shows-off the writer's voice and language in a way that e-mail rarely does, especially when that writer is a literary figure? Recent books of letters include those of Robert Lowell, James Wright, Amy Clampitt, and Louise Bogan, as well as James Dickey. Lowell and Wright were both poets with whom Dickey corresponded—Lowell, the poet whom Dickey considered his arch rival; and Wright, one he regarded as a true friend. Not only the Dickey fan, but the general reader as well, has good reason to be pleased with the two-volume edition of his letters recently published by the University of Missouri Press. These two, along with a book containing the lectures from his poetry survey course at the University of South Carolina, provide new Dickey prose that adds to his oeuvre further insight about his career, his literary taste, and his life.

I never met James Dickey, though I did hear him read in Charleston back in the 1980s; and when I was first studying poetry writing, he was one of the poets whose tapes I would check out of the local library and listen to over and over. Reading the letters in these two volumes reminded me why I loved those early Dickey poems.

One might ask why another set of James Dickey's letters, when there is already one, *CruX*, published in 1999 (two years after his death), containing close to 360 letters, about twenty percent of his correspondence located at the time. Besides the letters, *CruX* includes a brief introduction of two-and-a-half pages, but no in-depth overview or commentary to put the letters in context. In contrast, the two-volume edition of his letters, entitled *The One Voice of James Dickey*, contains nearly 600 letters, plus an overview that precedes each chapter. Each chapter contains a decade of letters, the easiest imaginable method of organization for a book of correspondence. The extensive commentary provided by editor Gordon Van Ness enhances the reader's understanding of the letters that follow.

Besides providing an overview of Dickey's life, Van Ness gives a detailed analysis of the literary scene during the decade at hand. His treatment is fair, with no attempt to show Dickey as a one-dimensional figure—a caricature of the obnoxious, boisterous self that some have made him out to be. Van Ness's treatment is enlightening, providing a

factual explanation of what was going on in Dickey's life, while the letters that follow the commentary sometimes give Dickey's not-always-accurate version. Dickey is more prone to tell it the way he would like for things to be. Van Ness, however, warns the reader that the letters in no way offer a complete picture of Dickey's life. Yet, accompanied by his commentary, they do offer the opportunity to see more than a few facets of this many-faceted man. So here is the world, or glimpses of it, through the eyes of a highly intelligent, gifted writer intent on telling the world's story his own way. The only thing missing is a brief chronology like the one provided by *Cruix*, which I found myself occasionally turning to.

Van Ness bases the title of these two volumes on the theory that even though James Dickey was a man who held little regard for factual truths and a man of contradictions, he always spoke with one voice. Indeed, it is fascinating reading to watch Dickey rearrange the facts—especially of his own life—when convenient, once saying in a letter that at an early age he had married a young woman from Australia, who died shortly after. Van Ness considers Dickey's lies and fabrications a part of his voice, that here was a man who took lying for granted as something that creative people do. Dickey himself says close to the same thing in his letters.

Van Ness also asserts that "one voice" does not mean that Dickey necessarily shared the attitude of his poetic personae regarding violence, power, and the closely related issues of gender and race—though many critics have charged that he did. Van Ness doesn't back down from discussing the sharp divide that these issues caused, in terms of what critics and readers thought, and still think, about Dickey. But, wisely, he doesn't try to have the last say. He covers other difficult issues, as well: Dickey's view of life as warfare, his early feelings of inadequacy, his need to be recognized as the best, his careerism, his alcoholism and family problems, his later creative failures.

The first volume begins with Dickey as a young man in the early 1940s, not fully mature, away from home at college, and then in the service; he is devoted to his mother, to the idea of having long-distance girlfriends, and to books. A voracious reader, while in the Army Air Corps he repeatedly asked his mother to buy literary works and send them to him. His letters show his love for reading and learning, and later his ambition to make something of his talents, to be recognized.

As he matured, married, and settled into writing poetry, it is impressive how hard he worked. In fact, a good reason—though not the only one—for poets to read Dickey's letters is for the inspiration. In a letter to poet James Wright, Dickey expresses a goal of his: "The longer I write the more I am left with just one criterion of worth in regard to any poem I happen to be working on: if the poem is saying something I didn't think I knew, then I know it is going to be good, or at least that it has a chance to be good. If only the old ordinary poetry-writing voice is speaking, then it is just going to be an old ordinary Dickey poem, and I try to change it into something else."

Those who like to read letters of literary figures, as I do, will especially enjoy Dickey's correspondence with other writers. His goal after he became an established poet was to write three or four letters a day, five whenever possible—and he advised young writers to do the same. As such an avid letter writer, he enjoyed a large circle of correspondents, both friends and literary figures. Besides James Wright, there were letters to such luminaries as Donald Hall, Anne Sexton, Stanley Burnshaw, even W. C. Williams and Ezra Pound.

It's not possible to decipher the reasoning behind each letter, but one could gather that some were written because that's what it took to get ahead and some were written in friendship. Dickey's letters are quick to praise and flatter some poets and to state his dislike for others, most notably Allen Ginsberg. Those to James Wright are inspired, spilling over with affection and a mutual love of poetry—though the friendship began in 1958 with an exchange of hot, indignant letters between Wright and Dickey after Dickey, in a review, had basically dismissed Wright's work with a negative comment.

The letters sometimes rise to Dickey's own style of eloquence, as in this one written in 1963 to Donald Hall, describing the Dickeys' temporary home in Portland, Oregon: "We have an old house, a magnificent estate on the river: the damndest place you ever saw. Seagulls bash into the window of my study, convinced that a man is sitting in the middle of air they could be flying in, and ringnecked pheasants walk through the yard at all times of day and night."

In another letter, this one to a *Time* magazine reporter, he describes a large water moccasin in the Congaree swamp: "He turned to me once and opened his mouth, and it looked like the white gates of hell itself. In fact, it was!" At other times he could be direct, even blunt, as he sometimes was when stating his opinion about a poet: "I am sorry Gwendolyn Brooks has declined to be one of the judges, and twice as sorry that Kenneth Rexroth, whom I detest and who detests me even more, is going to be one of the judges."

Besides the literary interest, there is much to learn from the letters about the man himself. Dickey's obsessions are always apparent. In the early letters, time after time, he openly expresses his affection for his wife, Maxine, and family. Later he writes about archery, the natural world, and his guitar playing. The letters show him working hard to sell books and further his own career with readings and programs that showcase him as a poet, but he also works hard to do the same for other poets. And he always sees himself as a writer. To him, that is a given.

After the publication of *Deliverance* in 1970, however, Dickey's letters rarely show the focus on poetry, the drive, that they did beforehand. They still retain an interest for the reader, but for a different reason. In the later letters, Dickey's attention turns more often to poetry biz, going about the mundane chores of attending to the public relations side of his writing. A few of his notions, which after the passage of time seem more inappropriate and outrageous than wrong hearted, are down-right bold.

Take, for example, Dickey's frequent requests for honorary degrees from universities. Imagine writing someone at a university and asking, point blank, for an honorary degree, with maybe the excuse that your spouse wants you to have one. Or imagine writing to a friend who's running for re-election as president—say, Jimmy Carter—giving him advice, a week before the election, on how to debate his opponent, even though he hasn't asked for your opinion. So the later letters spark their own kind of interest. From what I could tell, Van Ness chose wisely in his selection of letters to complete the two volumes, ending with a chapter of commentary entitled "Debriefings," which leaves the reader, appropriately and dramatically, with a few lines of Dickey's poems.

James Dickey: Classes on Modern Poets and the Art of Poetry is taken from transcriptions of Dickey's taped lectures of classes held in 1971-72 at the University of South Carolina. The book, containing chapters on forty-some poets, is edited by Donald J.

Greiner. The poets studied are an odd mix of major and minor ones, poets Dickey had an interest in for one reason or another. The sequence is not chronological. Instead, Dickey chose his own method for ordering the poets. To ignore the table of contents is to be continually surprised by who follows whom. First comes Emily Dickinson, the only woman in the lineup, which includes the major poets William Butler Yeats, Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Frost, E. A. Robinson, W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, Ezra Pound, Philip Larkin, and Randall Jarrell. Dickey states that one of his course goals is to pass along the titles of books he has read and found of interest, and he is generous with his recommendations. At the end of the book Greiner provides almost nine pages of sources, listing many of those books for the reader.

In his introduction Greiner states that Dickey himself used a light touch in editing the lectures, leaving Greiner to believe that Dickey intended for the editor of the typescripts to follow suit with a light hand. Yet as soon as I came to the word “there’re” on the second page of the initial lecture, I began to wish for a heavier hand. The voice that mesmerizes in the classroom, especially through use of repetition and the rephrasing of a question to students, is hard to transfer to the page with that same charisma—without some editing.

It took me awhile to get used to the style of the lectures, not so much because of colloquialisms but because the pacing was decidedly oral. What, for example, was most likely a dramatic repetition when heard in person, or on tape, merely slowed this reader down: “Let me tell you a little bit about William Bell. This here’s William Bell. What’s he look like; what does he look like to you? Know what he looks like to me? He looks like one of these overintellectualized English Oxford types who know a lot more than you.” Some will say that I’ve missed the whole point, which is to capture the voice of James Dickey, to hear his exact words. His voice—along with his great intellect, of course—is the book’s strength. Yet, with a heavier hand at editing, and thus without some of the cumbersome spots in the lectures that slow them down, it seems to me that the voice would have come through even stronger.

One of the best lectures is about Edward Arlington Robinson, a poet Dickey had studied at length when he helped editor Morton Zabel put together an edition of Robinson’s poetry. Dickey reads “Richard Corey” and several other poems, explains Robinson’s obsessions with failure, describes his style, recounts episodes from his life, and tells of his successes—a lecture of true substance. The ones on Hopkins, Yeats, Frost, Pound, and Thomas also offer solid evidence for Dickey’s talents as a teacher.

No wonder he held his students spell bound, when he ad-libbed such commentary as this on Dylan Thomas: “Here is this preternaturally brilliant South Wales boy whose father is a schoolmaster, and he has a very close kind of family feeling, but no one could figure him out. He’s not that much different from the other kids around Swansea, where he grew up in South Wales, but he has this great gift of gab. He’s a congenital liar, but what he said later in life is that the lies gave rise to the poems. And there’s something to ponder about that. As Picasso said, art is the lie that enables us to see the truth. Dylan Thomas knew that in the beginning.” Dickey is gossipy, too, and that certainly would perk up students’ ears. It did mine. He talks, for example, about the filming of *Deliverance*, about Frost’s ego, and about the personal animosity between him and the critic Yvor Winters.

I can’t say that I was particularly interested in hearing about some of the minor poets, such as Charles Causley, Joe Langland, Sidney Keyes, Alun Lewis, and others; but

for Dickey scholars these, too, must be important reading. In fact, I would think that this book opens a whole new avenue of Dickey scholarship, almost like having James Dickey himself walk into a seminar room, today, wheeling a cart loaded with books he considers essential, or at least tangentially important. Even though I'm not a Dickey scholar, I found myself jotting notes in the margin throughout the book, and I'd recommend that other poets and general readers with an interest in poetry do so as well.

The final chapter of the book, taken from a final class session held five days before Dickey died in 1997, is poignant. True to himself, and his one voice, Dickey begins by talking about creativity. It's as if he has been opening the door to poetry, lecture by lecture, poet by poet; and now he invites his listener in: "Invent.... You can say as much as you like with stuff you know. But don't be confined by it. Don't think about—honestly—don't think about telling the truth. Because poets are not trying to tell the truth, are they?"